

Tying the new to the old

Hittite sealing practices and the introduction of the cuneiform script in Anatolia

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In Hittite Anatolia (ca. 1650-1180 BCE), two writing systems were in use: an indigenous hieroglyphic writing system, the Anatolian Hieroglyphs,¹ and the cuneiform script, which was adopted from Mesopotamia. This latter script, which was already in use from the end of the fourth millennium onwards, was probably introduced to Anatolia in the 17th century BCE. Though the Hittites did make some adjustments to accommodate the script to their language, for the most part they took over the existing scribal conventions along with the script. In one respect, however, the Hittite cuneiform tradition was fundamentally different from the very start: the sealing method. In Mesopotamia and Syria, clay tablets were sealed by means of cylinder seals; contracting parties and/or witnesses would roll their cylinder seal over the clay (fig. 1). By contrast, Hittite clay tablets were impressed with a stamp seal (fig. 2). In addition, most sealed Hittite clay documents have strings in their core, which protruded from an opening at the bottom of the tablet. It is generally assumed that to these strings, lumps of clay (*bullae* or *cretulae*) with seal impressions of the witnesses were attached.

This paper will argue that this curious and intriguing Hittite sealing practice, which has not been attested outside of Anatolia, can be explained through the concept of anchoring; it will show that the introduction of a new writing system (the cuneiform script) was integrated with long-existing sealing tradition. Sealing by means of strings and *bullae* has been attested already from the Neolithic onwards in non-literate contexts (e.g. for the sealing of doors, sacks and vessels).² The tying of strings was considered to be a crucial ingredient of the sealing process, which is evident from the Hittite verb for sealing, of which the basic meaning is ‘to tie’. By integrating the use of strings in the sealing process of clay tablets, the novel technology of the cuneiform script was creatively (if only symbolically) connected to the traditional custom of ‘binding’.



Fig. 1: Mesopotamian tablet with cylinder seal impression



Fig. 2: Hittite land deed with stamp seal impression

¹ The origins of this script are debated; according to some scholars, it was invented around 1500 BCE, after the introduction of the cuneiform script, whereas others maintain that the hieroglyphic script already existed from the beginning of the second millennium onwards, thus predating the cuneiform script.

² From the second millennium onwards, this sealing method was in all likelihood also used for the sealing of wooden documents in Anatolia. Hittite cuneiform records on clay inform us about the existence of (sealed) wooden tablets, but due to their perishable nature, they have not survived.

